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Emotion as visual image

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

EMOTION AS VISUAL IMAGE

By

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I intend to explore the importance of object and image as symbols that visually express emotion.

I am interested in the human condition and the influences and impressions that cause us to see things the way we do.

Through the transformation of feelings and forms, I hope to relate emotional responses to situations we find ourselves in. I plan to use holloware techniques within a sculptural format, possibly combined with clay and other materials to achieve these images.

In Memory of

HANS CHRISTENSEN

my great teacher and friend

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INTRODUCTION

No one would deny there are differences of opinion as to what constitutes the expression of emotion in art. Thus it is not my intent to debate these issues; rather to merely present my personal view and that of others who share a similar sentiment. It is one view--in one period of time--concerning my work and the innermost feelings toward it that I wish to share with you, the reader. Perhaps it will assist you in recognizing, rediscovering, or even discovering for the first time, the roots of your own feelings and emotions.

I. BACKGROUND

As an undergraduate I studied jewelry and metalsmithing, yet I felt no overwhelming passion toward the material until the beginning of my junior year. For it was then that I discovered, that although the process could be slow and painstaking, I was able to express certain feelings and images in a three-dimensional form as no other material would enable me to do. These impressions could not be drawn on paper, drafted nor painted. Furthermore, they could not, for some unexplainable reason, be modeled in wax or clay; not even carved in wood or stone. The properties of metal, being extremely plastic, yet self-supporting, seemed to naturally comply with my thinking and working process. It willfully yielded, yet was able to retain the new form I gave it.

Expressing myself verbally has always been a struggle; but while working I found I could express and communicate my feelings and emotions, and convey my perception of life to others.

However, the metal forming process soon became too slow for my thinking. At this point I realized that if I were to continue to work with the material, I would have to become more proficient at my craft. If I were able to produce these forms more quickly, I felt I wouldn't lose the spontaneity or destroy the emotional qualities that were so important to my work; and that technical errors would not interrupt or interfere with the visual effect of the finished piece.

Unfortunately, before long, I became so obsessed with perfecting technique, that the process began to interfere with my expression, and was destroying the spontaneous quality I was seeking. And although these forms were still symbols of my expression, the feelings were hidden: all pent up inside of these metal shells, as they were pent up inside of me, struggling to get out. The forms became products of the process rather than objects of my sensory imagery. The surfaces became slick and the forms were getting more and more stylized.

Not only had I built frustration over perfection, but also in trying to force the metal into certain forms and into becoming something other than itself--something it was just not capable of being--I had ended up with gross stylization. After a great deal of frustration, and (in retrospect) sightless study, I was, finally able to overcome this obstacle.

Only after I rediscovered clay did I begin to recognize my obsession. I found that some hand-building techniques were quite similar to some of the metal-forming techniques that I had been employing. I started applying these, but did not limit myself to them. This time I was consciously aware of the intrinsic properties of the clay and, in a way, cautious not to destroy them. I realized that the clay allowed for what the metal did not. Somehow that was precisely it! My sights changed. At once, I found I could use clay where the metal had failed. How narrow my sights had been! I felt free to use any material I needed in order to express my ideas. Here I had been professing truth to materials, and without realizing it, I had been violating the very nature of the material I loved.

I did realize, however, that during this time I had acquired a skill and mastery of my craft. I felt I no longer had to worry that technical errors or process would get in the way of my expression.

Everything began to fall into place. I began to use clay parts and pieces in combination with the metal and any other material essential for completing the qualities that the idea or image called for.

II. EMOTIONAL PROCESS

From the moment we are born, perhaps from the moment of conception we begin to experience. Each day of our lives is literally filled with a variety of feeling and emotions. Every act of awareness and every "interaction with our surrounding environment" contains some "emotional quality."[1] It is thought by psychologists to be one of the strongest human characteristics. Their findings show emotional conditioning winning over logic in almost every contest between the two. Explaining that "emotions are controlled by parts of the brain that are more primitive and developmentally much older than the part of the brain that appears to mediate logical thinking."[2]

Emotion is defined by psychologists as "visceral changes" . . . "to a given stimulus. . . . the physiological forms in which men experience their estimate of the harmful or beneficial effects of stimuli."[3] In "The Art in Painting," Albert Barnes defined it as "the immediate experience of an instinctive reaction."[4]

Emotion, environment, and experience are closely tied. According to Magna Arnold, who stated in a theoretical analysis of emotion, "the primary source of emotional arousal is stimulation from the external environment as it is perceived and evaluated by the person in light of his past experiences."[5] Everything with which we come in contact (every situation, and every experience we have) triggers some sort of emotional response in us. Furthermore, each response produces a

unique impression within us. Virtually every impression then releases hundreds of associations in our minds. As our range of experiences widens, so do our mental associations. Our natural instincts, our culture, society, heritage, education, our whole scope of experiences together with intuition form these impressions and shape the perception we have of the world around us. Each new impression that reaches our brain is systematically arranged in our memories. Then our intellect makes some order out of these associations.[6]

Ignorance and lack of experience also have an influence. If we have never encountered something before, we have no way of evaluating it. We would have no point of reference, nothing with which to associate it. Not until we feel this emotion again or encounter a similar situation are we able to make some sense of it.

Furthermore, although we have little or no control over our natural instinct and intuition, we do have control over logic and also have the ability to reason. In spite of this, we must also realize that they are learned and are products of our emotional conditioning.

It is thought that "the single most important variable in determining any person's behavior," is "the type of emotional learning or conditioning he has acquired during his life." And, "our acceptance or rejection of almost everything is a product of emotional conditioning. Our morals, our religious tendencies, our political outlook, even our aesthetic appreciation of art and music," are viewpoints that are instilled in us when we are very young. "Later as adults we may defend our morals or politics on rational grounds, but in fact these views are typically not a product of rational decision on our parts."[7]

Although our immediate response to any experience, any situation, any image, in fact anything we encounter that stimulates us, is above all, an emotional reaction. It is only after this impression has reached our minds, and after our minds and our intellects sets that impression among those already present in our memories, do we begin to make associations between a past experience and the new experience. Then we judge and evaluate them. This often takes place in a fraction of a second. Consequently, the way we respond is directly motivated by the outcome of our evaluations based on our own reference systems. The new experience then, is (in some ways) tainted by association with past experiences. But, we must also realize that if we had no reference system, and no similar experiences with which to associate, we would also have no way of distinguishing one feeling or experience from another, nor could we evaluate its relevance. Someone might be able to tell us about it--but--even that would be of little value, since it's only one person's perception. You would have to learn more through getting the reactions of many people (then too, a verbal account of a felt emotion or sensation is little clue for a felt experience of your own). In essence: you would be consciously constructing a reference system based on others' reports; you would be simulating the emotional process that is automatically carried on in your mind in order to evaluate the essence of the emotion or sensation you felt.

The importance of this reference system becomes clear. By using associations and our references of past experience to evaluate our new experiences, our perception of things, whether we accept or reject them, or whether we feel indifferent, is formed. Everything we

encounter has some sort of impact, stimulating either a positive or negative emotional response. As we go through life this framework of associations grows and develops. Although some associations are inherent in us all, certain experiences have more profound effects on us than others. And too, the impressions they make vary in degree, depending on our environment and our inherent nature, and become altered because of this. Proust's psychology is founded on similar beliefs and is based on:

> . . . these resonances that each perception sets up in the memory, which immediately links the present impression with the past, giving it an unlooked-for coloration, differing with each individual according to his temperament and his experiences. The instant a sensation rises to consciousness it is enriched with a mass of unpredictable new elements.
>
> Some of these associations are fundamental, common to almost all men, and relevant to man's nature. . . .[8]

So as we go through life our perception develops and our outlooks are shaped and influenced by our accumulated experience and our network of associations.

> . . . It is the work of art as a whole that symbolizes an emotional process--anything, from the rhythmic feeling of thinking a complex but clear, brief thought, to the whole sense of life, love, selfhood, and recognition of death that is probably the largest scope of our feeling.[9]

III. EXPOSITION

In quiet and tranquility emotion and intuition speak. Softly, yet steadily, in this trance-like state everything looks different. My senses seem more pointed and keen. I seem to be seeing more clearly and my feelings are more intense. Images float freely in my sight and in my mind. It is in these moments, sometimes lasting only a few brief seconds, that I am able to realize some sense of my innermost feelings and emotions; they are remnants of the past and views of the future: they are feelings and sensations, experiences and impressions, that have made an impact on me. They form images--images that I see in my mind--whether my eyes are open or closed. As I begin to sense them, I try to capture some essence of that image or feeling. Sometimes, I scratch a note or a detail on paper to document that moment and later use as reference. For a time, I harbor these thoughts inside me where they develop and begin to become more coherent. As soon as they begin to crystalize, I start working on the piece. I use my sketches, together with image, idea, emotion, and intellect, as my guides.

The bringing together of these elements is seldom conscious. But somehow they begin to materialize and become clearly recognized while the object is taking shape. As I am working, I pour my emotions into the piece, and as it takes form it is absorbing every bit of myself. Certain underlying meanings and influences are uncovered. They are

released while working and transfer the object into a direct vehicle of my expression. The object begins to take on a character of its own. It is never any one of these elements, isolated or acting alone, that manifests this, but is all of them working together as a whole. John Dewey explains that what most people lack in order to be artists:

> . . . is not the inceptive emotion, nor yet merely technical skill in execution. It is capacity to work a vague idea and emotion over into terms of some definite medium. . . . between conception and bringing to birth there lies a long period of gestation. During this period the inner material of emotion and idea is as much transformed through acting and being acted upon by objective material as the latter undergoes modification when it becomes a medium of expression.
>
> It is precisely this transformation that changes the character of the original emotion, altering its quality so that it becomes distively esthetic in nature. In formal definition emotion is esthetic when it adheres to an object formed by an expressive act.[10]

My work is eclectic and selective, combining and incorporating interests and attitudes from many sources. Both my conscious and my instinctive natures work, evaluating and associating the emotional responses I feel. I try to see their importance and the relationship they have to me, and their relevance to people near me and with society as a whole.

The issues involved in my work are many. It often employs life experience and concerns for society's expectations. Frequently, it refers to our struggle within our society and the breaking of those invisible confines. Simultaneously, it evokes a sense of growth and change. It utters dualities, from internal struggle to external realities--inside and outside--conformity and diversity; of breaking patterns

of consistency in life, in living, in our individual lives and in society. There are constant changes: joy and sadness. There is searching and seeing, hiding and concealing, the realities of our true selves. There is longing to function and exist more aware of our feelings, experiences and capabilities. There is the need to communicate, to become freer to wonder and question. There is a desire to be more sensitive to our own feelings and experiences and, more importantly, to those of others. There is hope of breaking restrictions and boundaries of our existence, perhaps discovering, that most often they are self imposed.

It's looking at people, at nature and deep inside. It addresses some of those things we tend to overlook, things we encounter each day, and tries to realize the detail and subtle nuances that go unnoticed. It is sensitivity to see that things, often called ugly, have qualities and certain aspects that are lovely: gnarling branches, and folding flesh in gesture and movement; weathered wrinkles etched on an old woman's face--scars from endurance. It is discovering ourselves through our surroundings, studying details and allowing our feelings to emerge instead of turning away because it would be simpler.

It is digging deeper inside, instead of covering things up. Being afraid of exposing our vulnerabilities we build shells to cover them, layer upon layer, and there never seems to be enough. But maybe, if they are torn away we could become more sensitive, caring and observant. Maybe our perspectives would be widened if we face our imperfections, change our elitist attitudes thus freeing us from certain restrictions.

Many of these effects are frequently apparent, but not necessarily in any specific order nor present in each piece. However, the thread that always runs through is the constant concern for the human element.

The forms are mostly organic, anthropomorphic and biomorphic. They are sometimes sexual or sensual, but mostly these characteristics stem from their visceral internal roots. They speak of life and of living things--man, plant, and animal. The forms personify life forces in their qualities and in their existence. Sprouting ovoids, embryonic sacs, pods and placenta. Shells and cocoons that protect and conceal, feelings and emotions, and the life form, trapped inside, attempting to get out. They are held and enclosed by internal and external structures that encase and bind. They are frozen imaginal stages, moments in time and space, often quiescent, yet transitional, in metamorphosis and change. Discarded remnants, cast off fragments of a life cycle's remains. Mass and volume, edge and line, the forms personify life forces in their qualities and in their existence. As I see it they are often specific human characteristics, people, or myself. They evolve from and are involved in our society, the environment, and nature, often depicted in an anonymous way through these forms.

As we study these forms it seems simpler to realize those things which are difficult to see or hard to face in ourselves. They are less revealing to others and less threatening to encounter. Instead of mirroring one's image it allows you to step back, and hopefully gain a more objective view. A more realistic view might shatter those rose-colored glasses through which we often view ourselves and our lives,

". . .the total experience of perception with its attendant meanings and attached feelings would be dismembered. The life would go out of the image leaving a dead imitation instead of a living re-creation."[11]

The forms take on human, plant and animal character and essence. They become living beings, life forces in themselves. They allude to life forms; they are men and women; plant and animal; they are you and they are me; yet each is its own and seems to assume its own character and distinct personality.

Primitive people used animal forms to represent gods and the spiritual, and also to harness or represent the things they did not understand. Many artists use human/animal forms in their expression. Henry Moore, for example, has remarked that the humanist organic element is of fundamental importance to his sculpture, giving it its vitality. He finds that each of his carvings bear in his mind a human or occasionally an animal character and personality, and that personality controls its design and formal qualities as it develops.[12] "Francis Bacon . . .uses the human figure as his principle iconographic device and attempts to emotionalize the objects and scenes of the visible world."[13] Although he seldom spoke publicly about his work, Bacon did say in one statement, "I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime. . . ."[14] Lee Bontecou, is another artist whose work often speaks in similar metaphors in both her use of form and materials. Donald Judd has said: (her) "work asserts its own existence, form and power. It becomes an object in its own right."[15]

Another way I have found to give life-like qualities to my forms, is through surface treatment. I do not use surface texture merely as pattern, or to decorate, but rather to imply and allude to certain visual and/or tactile qualities that we can associate with our own inherent physical qualities to those in nature or other living organisms. They have a definite reason and purpose for being included, many times to contrast hard to soft, smooth to coarse, passive to violent, man to woman.

Many times my work includes hermaphroditic qualities. This is symbolized in the horn-like projections and the crevices and gaps I frequently employ. The 'horns' are symbolic of animal, plant and human physical characteristics. Although they may represent men and the phallus, and could also represent quite literally the horns of animals or the stems and stalks of plants or flowers, they also stand for all that is strong, masculine, callous, piercing, threatening and existential. The crevices speak more of women, of inner feelings and emotions which we hide and protect from others, the seeds of our souls, the beginnings of our existence, the birth and germination of our lives, stages of development and changes taking place, the viseral and internal.

The environments in which these forms exist, are structures, and foundations, the soil in which they are rooted, the environment they come from, are bound to, are escaping from or are confined by. All have certain innate qualities similar to those in the objects themselves, just as a parent might have with a child.

CONCLUSION

I realize that the objects of my expression can never be totally understood as I perceive them because of the differences between peoples' perceptions and associations. However, the viewer can make similar associations with feelings and experiences of their own. They can recognize a situation, recall an experience, a feeling or sensation as they address the work. In sharing my images, my feelings and emotions, perhaps the viewer can relate better to their own, perhaps they might recognize something of themselves which has gone unnoticed, or perhaps recognize some unacceptable quality in themselves.

The issues in my work are many. If I must characterize it in any one word, I must call it emotional. It speaks from an inner reality--one that internalizes all of life's experiences, and seeks in essence, to express this in some part.

FOOTNOTES

[1]CRM Books, Psychology Today: An Introduction, (Del Mar, Calif.: Communications Research Machines, 1970), p. 391-392.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Ibid., p. 684.

[4]Albert C. Barnes, The Art in Painting, 3rd ed., rev. and enl., (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1974), p. 10.

[5]CRM Books, p. 392.

[6]See Graham Collier, Art and the Creative Consciousness, with an introduction by René Huyghe, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 31, 87, 88; CRM Books, p. 393-397; René Huyghe, Ideas and Images in World Art: Dialogue with the Visible, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1959), p. 432, 433; Iredell Jenkins, Art and the Human Enterprise, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 188.

[7]CRM Books, p. 4, 5.

[8]Huyghe, p. 432.

[9]Susanne K. Langer, Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 113.

[10]John Dewey, Art as Experience, (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934), p. 75.

[11]Robert Capers and Jerrold Maddox, Image and Imagination: An Introduction to Art, (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), p. 105.

[12]Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics, with contributions by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 598.

[13]Ibid., p. 593.

[14]Ibid., p. 621.

[15]Donald Judd, "Lee Bontecou," Arts Magazine, (Vol. 39, No. 7, April 1965), p. 17.

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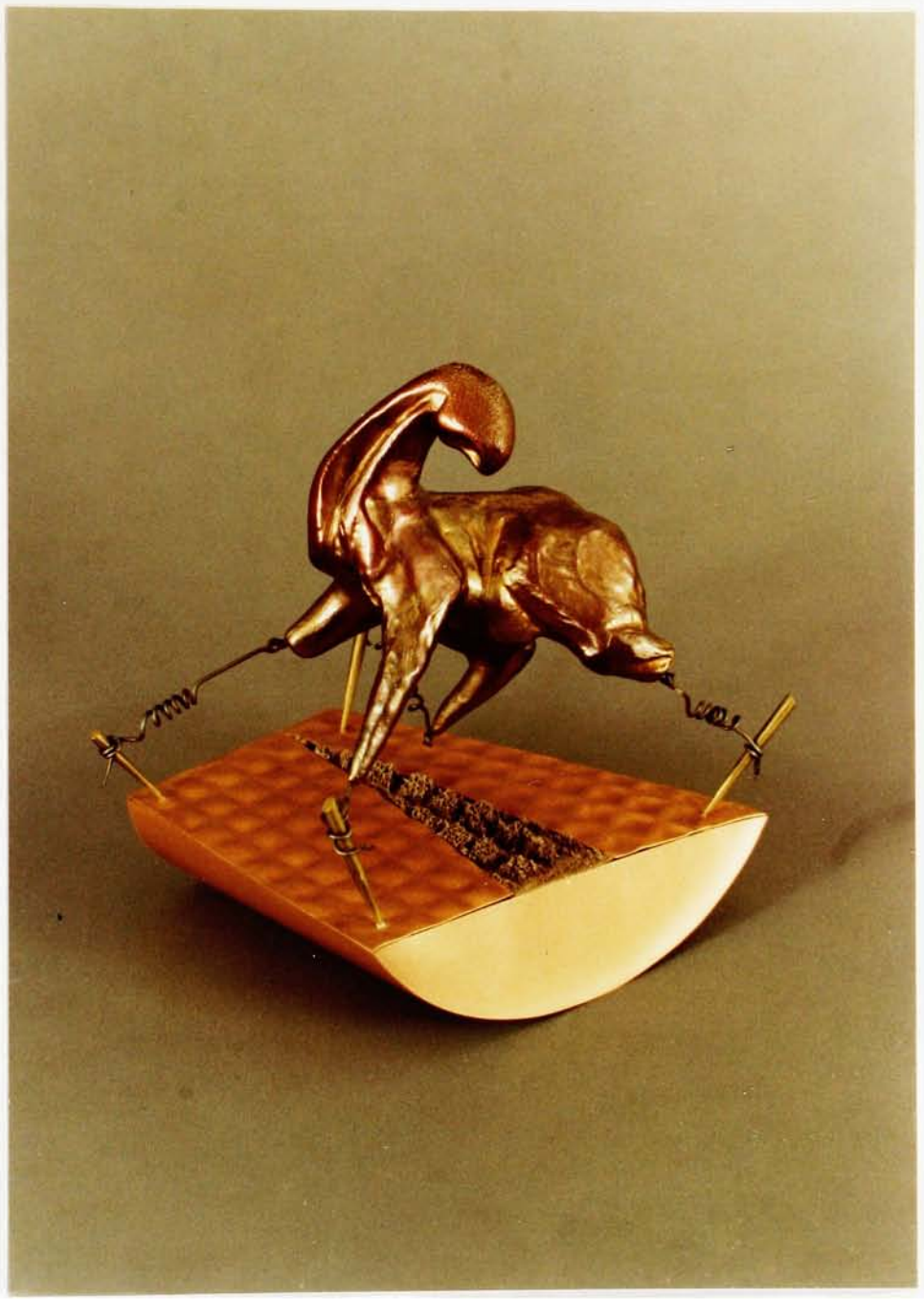
APPENDIX

Description of Photographs:

1.	"Rocking Horse Dilemma"	Copper, brass, iron, clay. 9"×7"×8" 1982
2.	"The Grass is Always Greener"	Clay, iron, wood. 12"×10"×10" 1982
3.	"Beholden"	Clay, brass, steel. 30"×9"×12" 1983
4.	"Goats and Cow Grates"	Brass, copper, clay. 24"×16"×10" 1983
5.	"Breaking Inner Limits"	Brass, copper, glass. 14"×12"×11" 1983
6.	"Untitled"	Cooper, brass, steel. 19"×10"×8" 1983



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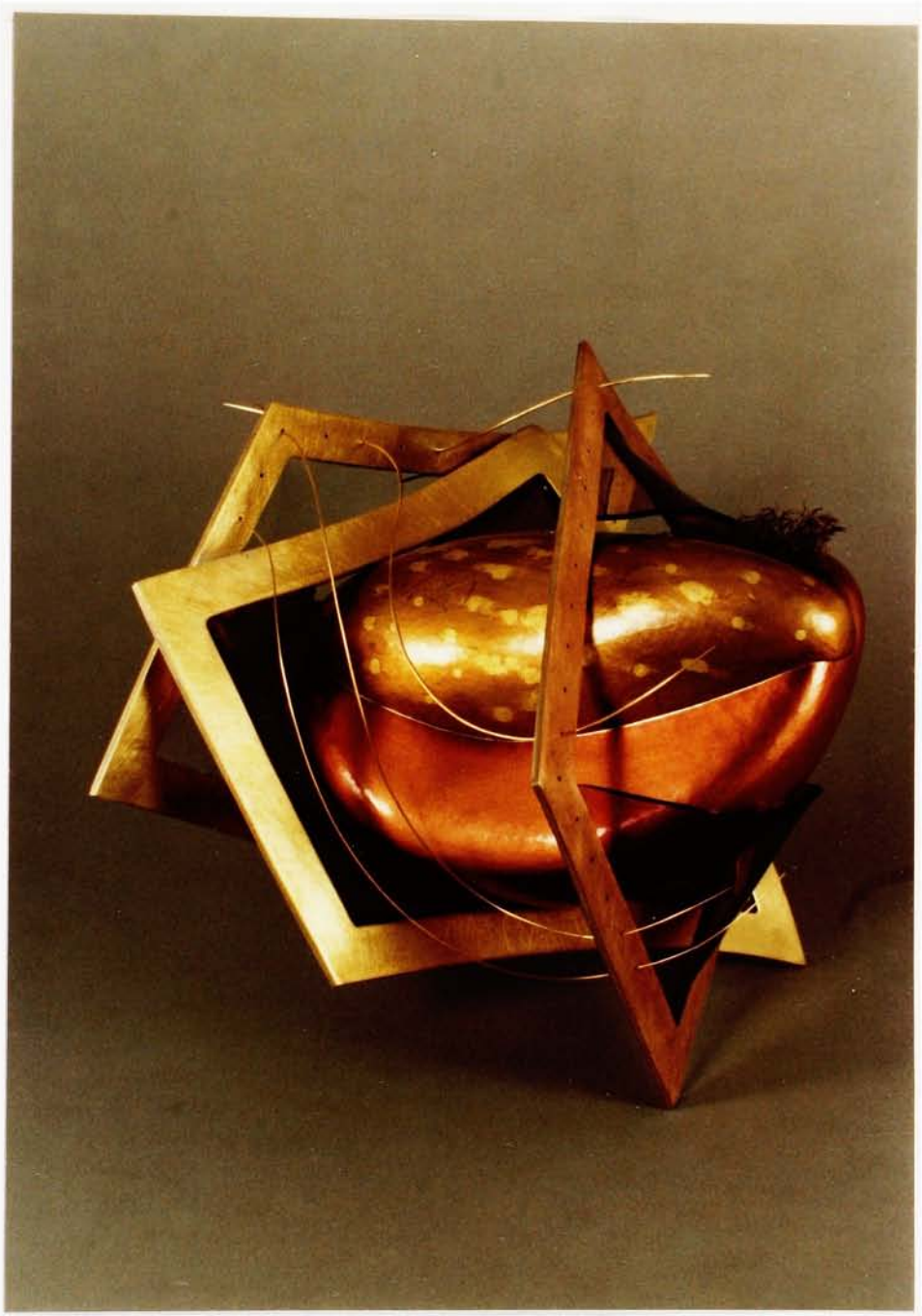

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